Mobility counseling for housing choice voucher holders

Overview

Low-income families often face considerable barriers to using housing choice vouchers in low poverty, resource-rich areas, including a lack of familiarity with the neighborhoods and landlords who are apprehensive about renting to voucher holders.

Voucher holders that seek to rent from owners that do not regularly rent to voucher holders may also face heightened qualification and financial barriers, including increased credit scrutiny and greater requirements for up-front payments to cover security deposits, move-in fees, and other expenses. Because of these and other factors, including a desire to live near friends and family, voucher holders may limit their housing search to neighborhoods with which they are familiar and where they know landlords are willing to rent to voucher holders. Mobility counseling helps interested voucher holders learn about a wider range of neighborhoods, including resource-rich neighborhoods.

Public housing agencies can create mobility programs (either on their own or in
partnership with a non-profit) that offer one-on-one counseling sessions and apartment search assistance, as well as group workshops on tenant rights and navigating financial barriers, neighborhood tours, aid in negotiating with landlords, and post-search guidance on how to access services in an unfamiliar neighborhood. Together with programs to provide financial assistance to cover security deposits and first- and last month’s rent, mobility counseling programs can help low-income households move to areas that offer safe streets, high-performing schools and access to good jobs. This section describes some of the considerations for cities, towns and counties interested in developing a program providing mobility counseling for housing voucher holders.

**Approach**

Although the Housing Choice Voucher program is designed to give voucher holders choice about where they live, in practice families tend to limit their housing search to places with which they are familiar, that are close to their current residence, or that are located within easy traveling distance. As a result, few voucher holders relocate to resource-rich areas that offer access to high-quality schools, safe streets and other important neighborhood amenities.

To help voucher holders expand their search, some localities have developed mobility counseling programs. These programs offer information, one-on-one guidance, and sometimes financial support to help voucher holders search for and secure housing in areas with quality housing as well as low rates of poverty and violence, top-notch public services, and other resources that help to support positive economic outcomes.

Many mobility counseling programs help voucher holders learn about and access resource-rich areas. These services can include providing information about housing developments, schools, and amenities in different neighborhoods and conducting community tours to introduce voucher holders to new areas. Some programs also help voucher holders find a unit by maintaining active listings in resource-rich areas of particular units or landlords who have indicated a willingness to participate in the program. In some cases, programs make direct referrals of voucher holders to specific owners and/or provide transportation to help voucher holders learn more about housing opportunities in different (or specific) neighborhoods. Some mobility counseling programs also make active efforts to reach out to owners to encourage them to participate in the voucher program.
Mobility counseling programs can also help voucher holders prepare to move and provide post-move support. Some programs provide financial counseling or coaching—covering topics like savings, debt, and credit—in order to make it more likely voucher holders will pass tenant screening processes and stay in the unit over the long term. Mobility programs may also offer financial support, either grants or loans, which help cover security deposits or moving expenses. After moving in, counseling programs can help voucher holders connect with neighbors and access new schools, health care and other resources.

In some regions, the most desirable areas are located in adjacent municipalities. In such cases, regional cooperation can help voucher holders conduct a wide search and locate a unit in a resource-rich community. Programs in Baltimore and Chicago both work with multiple municipalities and housing departments to support cross-jurisdictional mobility. Mobility counseling programs can be run by public housing authorities, municipal or regional housing and community development departments or local non-profit organizations.

**Eligibility**

Mobility counseling programs generally designate specific “high-opportunity” or “resource-rich” areas on which to focus their counseling efforts by selecting neighborhoods or census tracts that have characteristics associated with positive economic and/or social outcomes. Although definitions vary, target neighborhoods generally have low poverty and crime rates, and high employment rates and student test scores. Other characteristics can include the availability of frequent and reliable public transit, access to healthcare providers and fresh and healthy food, and the presence of parks and recreational facilities. Sponsors of mobility counseling programs may need to gather and maintain data to define such areas, and create and publish maps to help voucher holders locate these areas. Often programs target new voucher recipients for mobility counseling. Some programs also provide on-going support to existing voucher holders to help families with subsequent moves (sometimes called second move counseling). Some programs provide some services on an ongoing basis, but limit other services (like financial support) to one-time assistance.

**Examples**

- The Chicago Housing Authority’s Mobility Counseling Program provides mobility assistance to families with new housing choice vouchers, those that do not currently live in an opportunity area and those moving into the area with a voucher. The services include pre-moving workshops, community information and tours, and
grants for moving fees. The housing authority also defines Opportunity Areas and maintains a map of these areas. This program is offered in partnership with Housing Choice Partners which supports mobility counseling programs throughout the Chicago region.

- The Baltimore Housing Mobility Program is run by a regional non-profit organization, the Baltimore Regional Housing Partnership. The program provides pre-move counseling, housing search assistance and post-move counseling. Growing out of desegregation litigation, the program is open to current and former residents of Baltimore public housing as well as those on voucher waiting lists and those living in parts of Baltimore. The program has an online mapping tool to facilitate finding a unit in an opportunity area. The program operates in multiple jurisdictions within the Baltimore area, including Baltimore City and five surrounding counties.

Related resources

- Enterprise Community Partners has developed the online mapping tool Opportunity 360. This tool allows users to generate a community report with information about five dimensions of neighborhood opportunity: education, housing stability, health & well-being, economic security, and mobility. Data comes from a variety of sources and provides local, regional, state and national data points of comparison.

- The Kirwan Institute at The Ohio State University’s Opportunity Communities initiative is a mapping and research project that has helped to identify opportunity areas within various metropolitan regions. The research, maps, definitions, and data collection tools championed by this initiative can support the identification of local target areas.

- The Connecticut Fair Housing Center’s Opportunity Project offers information about opportunity areas and has conducted research about housing choice and mobility in the state. Their report Housing Mobility: What Do Housing Voucher Recipients Want? explores how low-income people of color make their housing decisions and identifies impediments to those who have considered, but not made opportunity moves. The project also defines opportunity areas (census tracts) and maintains maps of Connecticut showing these areas across the state. The non-profit, Open Communities Alliance, supports and advocates for mobility counseling in Connecticut and has produced this helpful fact sheet about mobility counseling.

- This 2012 report from PRRAC and the Urban Institute outlines considerations and provides resources for cities and counties developing a housing mobility program, including counseling services. A similar 2015 report provides an overview of housing mobility programs throughout the US.
See also:
Landlord recruitment and retention
Housing Choice Vouchers
Increased voucher payment standards in high-cost areas